William Morris

His Socialism

By John Spargo



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THE SOCIALISM OF WILLIAM MORRIS

By JOHN SPARGO

Author of "The Bitter Cry of the Children;" "The Socialists, Who They Are and What They Stand For"; "Socialism, a Summary and Interpretation of Socialist Principles," "Capitalist and Laborer," etc., etc.

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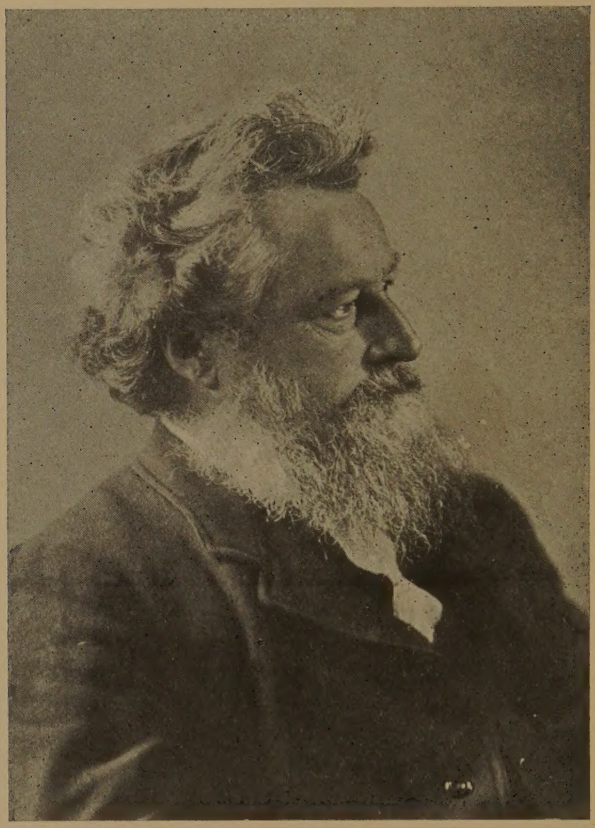
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To

Mary—my wife, and Mary—our daughter



William Morris

THE CLAIM OF SOCIALISM

I HAVE looked at this claim by the light of history and my own conscience, and it seems to me so looked at to be a most just claim, and that resistance to it means nothing short of a denial of the hope of civilization.

This then is the claim:—

It is right and necessary that all men should have work to do which shall be worth doing, and be of itself pleasant to do: and which should be done under such conditions as would make it neither over-wearisome nor over-anxious.

Turn that claim about as I may, think of it as long as I can, I cannot find that it is an exorbitant claim; yet again I say if Society would or could admit it, the face of the world would be changed; discontent and strife and dishonesty would be ended. To feel that we were doing work useful to others and pleasant to ourselves, and that such work and its due reward *could* not fail us! What serious harm could happen to us then? And the price to be paid for so making the world happy is Revolution.

WILLIAM MORRIS.

HOW can it be? That strong and fruitful life
Hath ceased—that strenuous but joyful heart—
That craftsman in the loom of song and art—
That voice by beating seas of hope and strife;
To lift the soul of Labor from the knife.
Who strove, 'gainst greed of factory and mart—
Ah! ere the morning, must he, too, depart,
While yet with battle cries the air is rife?

Blazon his name in England's book of gold,
Who loved her, and who wrought her legends fair,
Woven in song, and written in design,
The wonders of the press and loom—a shrine,
Beyond death's chilling hand, that shall enfold
In Life's House Beautiful a spirit rare.

WALTER CRANE.

From the London "Daily Chronicle," October 4, 1896.

THE SOCIALISM OF WILLIAM MORRIS



PON a day in the early autumn of 1885 a crowd of English Socialists filled the Thames Police Court. Earnest, grave-visaged men and women, many of them wearing badges of red ribbon gaudily embroidered with designs intended to symbolize the universal sunrise of Socialism, they had foregathered in the dingy courtroom to manifest their sympathy with eight of their comrades who had been arrested the day before under the most aggravatingly unjust circumstances. For many years a spot popularly known as Dod's Corner, at the junction of Dod Street and Burdett Road, had been used as a sort of open-air forum. All kinds of public meetings, religious, anti-religious and political had been commonly held there, especially on Sundays when there was practically no vehicular traffic thereabouts. Like the Salvation Army and other religious bodies, the propagandists of

Secularism and other cults, the Socialists of London—two hostile factions—had been accustomed to hold their meetings there, rarely getting more than a handful of listeners.

Three or four years previously the Social Democratic Federation had issued and distributed several thousand copies of a little tract, "Socialism Made Plain: a Manifesto to the Unemployed," and some one had shown a copy to the Prime Minister, Mr. Gladstone, who tossed it contemptuously aside with the remark, "Socialism will never take root in England. It is a foreign idea." By 1885 there had been some growth in the movement it is true, but not nearly so much as everybody except the Socialists themselves thought. Thanks to the splendid abilities and manifold activities of a small group of men and women, the press of the country devoted far more attention to the movement than the editors would have dreamed of permitting had they not been utterly deceived by appearances. As the propaganda grew more and more incessant the conservative aud well-to-do

classes became genuinely alarmed. They had visions of a terrible reign of bloody terror. Something must be done at once to stop the agitation, or the Socialists would very soon ride in the saddle of government! Meanwhile, the level-headed men and women among the Socialists were enjoying the plight of the enemy as a huge joke.

The alarm spread among the police and the Metropolitan Police Department soon became thoroughly demoralised. With the customary stupidity of police officialism, a policy of repression was decided upon. Socialists were to be prevented from holding open-air meetings. Had the police deliberately sought means of assisting the Socialists they could hardly have been more successful. As if by magic, the warring factions of Socialists came together and declared a truce, uniting to meet a common enemy. Then, too, public sentiment of a very influential kind and magnitude was aroused on the side of the Socialists in defence of English freedom of speech and assembly. On the day previous to the historic gathering in the Thames Police Court, instead

of a mere handful of men as usual, consisting of a few zealous Socialists and a motley group of loungers waiting for the midday opening of the public houses, more than a thousand persons gathered at the famous corner. Few of these cared anything about Socialism. Most of them were "agin th' peelers,"* and almost all of them animated in some degree by the English love of fair play and freedom of speech. Two dozen policemen had been sent to prevent the holding of the meeting, but they were powerless in the midst of such an angry mob. Smarting with the sense of defeat, as soon as the crowd had dispersed, some to their homes and others to the public-houses when they opened at one o'clock, the enraged policemen charged the few remaining Socialists with bludgeons and arrested eight of them.

When next morning the prisoners were arraigned before the magistrate, a Mr. Saunders, one of them was sentenced to two months' imprisonment with hard labor, fines being imposed upon all the others. The

*"Peelers" are Police.

magistrate's decision was greeted with loud hisses and cries of "Shame!" The policemen in the court at once tried to make several arrests and there was some resistance. William Morris, who had joined heartily in the hissing, was arrested, at once taken into the Dock and charged with disorderly conduct and striking a policeman, to which charge he at once entered an emphatic denial.

There were many persons in the court room who could have given testimony in support of the poet-artist's denial of the charge so hastily made against him had there been any semblance of a trial. No evidence was given on either side. After asking his name, to which Morris answered courteously enough, the magistrate—who knew perfectly well who the prisoner was—asked in an insolent tone, "What are you?" Morris flushed slightly, paused to consider his reply, and then answered, "I am an artist and a literary man: pretty well-known, I think, throughout Europe."

By many, the somewhat boastful reply of Morris to the magistrate has been re-

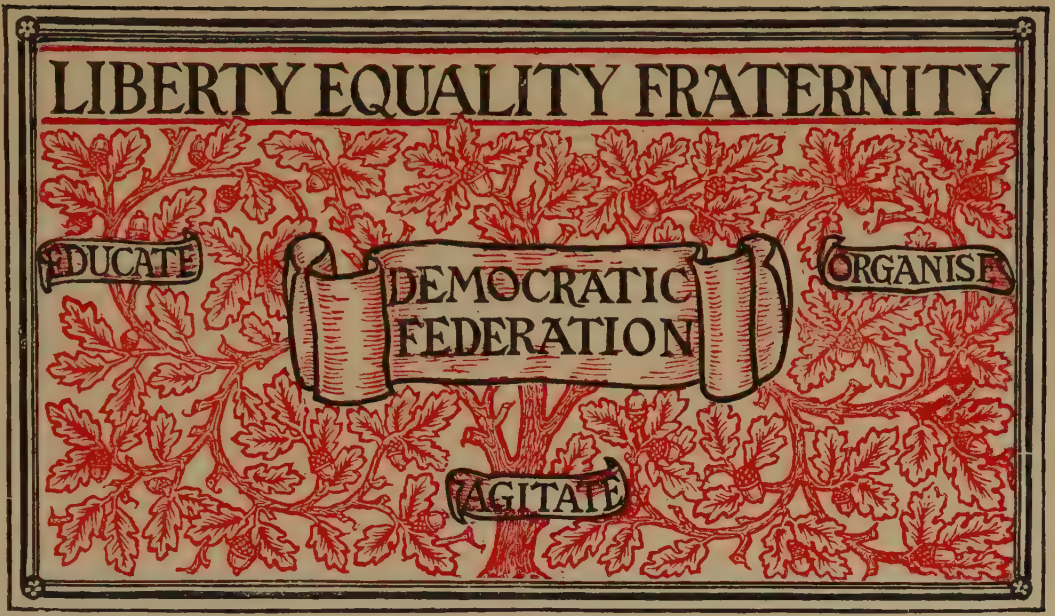
garded as evidence of his pride and egoism; an unnecessary assertion of his own reputation. His biographer, Mr. Mackail, thinks the reply was an "incautious" one. As a matter of fact it was neither boastful nor incautious. Morris was certainly no braggart, and the pause before his reply ought to prove that he spoke with rather more deliberation than was customary with him. The simple fact is that, according to the account of the incident which he often gave in conversation, Morris thought of his sciatica and of the plank-bed, and gave a reply calculated to insure his escape from a night in a cell. It was not particularly heroic, and Morris often had twinges of conscience upon that account.

Of course, he was dismissed. "I suppose you did not intend to do this?" asked the magistrate. "I never struck him at all" said the prisoner. "Well, I will let you go," said the magistrate. "But I have not done anything," said the prisoner, resenting the magistrate's tone of patronage. "Well, you can stay if you like," responded the magistrate, to which the prisoner rejoined, "I dont

want to stay." That was all that transpired in that mockery of a trial. On the following Sunday a procession of many thousands marched to Dod's Corner and the right of public meeting there was once more upheld by the Socialists of London.

THE story of William Morris's life has been told in detail by several biographers in volumes which are easily accessible, and it is therefore unnecessary that I should give in this paper even a sketch of the career of this remarkable, many-sided man. My main purpose is to set forth some little-known facts in connection with his activity in the Socialist movement—a phase of his career to which not one of his biographers has done justice. Just as Morris himself resented it, I resent as utterly unwarranted the oft-repeated statement that his interest in the Socialist movement was short-lived, and that he had ceased to believe in Socialism some years before his death. I resent, too, as the artist-poet himself did, the suggestion that he really was not a Socialist at all, but an Anarchist.

When William Morris definitely proclaimed himself to be a Socialist and formally allied himself with the small handful of men who were struggling bravely to raise the standard of political Socialism in England, he was almost fifty years old. He was already famous as the greatest living exponent of decorative art; his wall-papers and tapestries had long ceased to be the butt of cheap wits and become accepted standards of beauty; he had been elected a Fellow of his college at Oxford; his poetry had won its way into public favor, and he had declined the flattering offer of the Professorship of Poetry at Oxford, the position which Matthew Arnold had occupied. In a word, Morris was in his prime when he joined the Socialist movement, in 1883, and brought to it all the influence which belonged to him as one of the greatest men of his own, or indeed of any, age. And the members of the association with which he identified himself recognized this: it is on record that one of their number, the most influential of them all, said with enthusiasm, "It has doubled our strength at a single stroke!"



Membership Card Designed by Morris for the Democratic Federation

In January, 1881, there appeared in the pages of *The Nineteenth Century* a notable paper entitled "The Dawn of a Revolutionary Epoch," from the pen of a well-known radical journalist, Henry Mayers Hyndman. In that same year, at Mr. Hyndman's invitation, a meeting of independent radical thinkers of various schools was held under the presidency of the Positivist leader Professor Alfred Beesley. Mr. Hyndman presented to all who attended that meeting copies of a little book which he had written, as a sort of text-book of constructive democracy, entitled "England for All." The little book fills a somewhat unique place in the Socialist literature of England on account of the fact that two of its chapters, "Capital" and "Labour" were taken almost entirely from Marx's great masterpiece, *Capital*, being the first introduction of Marxian theory to English working-class politics and laying for English Socialism Marxian theoretical foundations. As a result of Mr. Hyndman's efforts, the Democratic Federation was formed with a semi-collectivist programme. By 1883 the Federation had

grown much more definitely socialistic, so that the few radicals who had been identified with it could not continue as members and left.



BOUT this time, Morris, who was a casual attendant at the meetings of the Federation, found himself in the position of having outgrown mere political radicalism. In 1876, like many another eminent Englishman, he had been roused by the troubles in Bulgaria to take an active interest in radical politics. He became the treasurer of the Eastern Question Association, an anti-imperialistic body, and wrote for it some of its most effective campaign literature, including some manifestoes to workingmen, songs and leaflets. In one of his manifestoes, published in 1877, there is a remarkable indication of the bent of his mind toward Socialism:

"Workingmen of England . . . . I doubt if you know the bitterness of hatred against freedom and progress that lies at the hearts of a certain part of the richer classes in this country," he wrote. "Their newspapers veil it in a kind of decent language, but do

but hear them talking amongst themselves, as I have often, and I know not whether scorn or anger would prevail in you at their folly and insolence . . . . These men if they had the power (may England perish rather!) would thwart your just aspirations, would silence you, would deliver you bound hand and foot to irresponsible capital. Fellow citizens, look to it, and if you have any wrongs to be redressed, if you cherish your most worthy hope of raising your whole order peacefully and solidly, if you thirst for leisure and knowledge, if you long to lessen these inequalities which have been our stumbling-block since the beginning of the world, then cast aside sloth and cry out against an Unjust War, and urge us of the middle class to do no less."

These brave words show that Morris was, even as early as 1877, far advanced toward Socialism. Here is recognition of the antagonism of classes in modern society, quite unusual for a man in the social position of Morris. Here, also, is a recognition of the fact that real reform must come from

the working class, that a great and noble aspiration toward a better social state must come from the mass, out of the mud and clay of toiling humanity. And here, clearly expressed, is the sublime conception of the working class raising itself "peacefully and solidly" and lessening the inequalities dating from the beginning of the world. Something of the vision of Socialism, of the time a-coming when all should be "better than well," had already come to him.

For a number of years after this Morris kept in close touch with the leaders of radical movements among the workingmen of London. Occasionally he renewed his political activities, but with no great zest. More and more, his thoughts were occupied with the great underlying social problem; political reform becoming less and less important to him. Gradually he had conceived a splendid social ideal, clearly enough defined. He saw foreshadowed the Cooperative Commonwealth, "but had no hope of any realisation of it." That hope was to come to him from the Socialist propaganda.

STRANGE as it may seem to one familiar with the important influence of economic theories in English politics, Morris was, he tells us, "blankly ignorant of economics." With his usual candor, he tells us that, in 1883, he "had never so much as opened Adam Smith or heard of Ricardo, or of Karl Marx."* His knowledge of Socialism was almost wholly confined to a study of the papers criticising Socialism in its Fourierist guise, by John Stuart Mill, posthumously published. These papers had the effect of convincing him of the soundness and practicability of Socialism. "Those papers

NOTE: It is perhaps worth while calling attention here to an article by Elbert Hubbard, in the Philistine, December 1903, more especially since Mr. Hubbard is by many uncritical persons regarded as a sort of American William Morris, and an unimpeachable authority upon all that pertains to the English poet-artist. In the article in question, Mr. Hubbard devotes many pages to a circumstantial account of the relations which existed between William Morris and Karl Marx, their intimate friendship, rivaling that of Damon and Pythias, ended by a bitter quarrel. Every word of that account is untrue. The two men never met and Morris never saw Marx in his life! When Morris joined the Socialist movement, early in 1883, he had never even heard of Marx. And the latter was a dying man then, the end coming on the fourteenth of March, 1883. In all literature I know of nothing more scandalous than Hubbard's article.

put a finishing touch on my conversion to Socialism," he says.

Such, then, was his mental attitude toward Socialism when Ernest Belfort Bax, one of the most brilliant men in the Federation, and now universally regarded as one of the foremost literary exponents of Socialism, succeeded in persuading him to join the Federation. "The meaning of my joining that body," he says, "was that I had conceived a hope of the realisation of my ideal. If you ask me how much of a hope, or what I thought we Socialists then living and working would accomplish toward it, or when there would be effected any change in the face of society, I must say, I do not know. I can only say that I did not measure my hope, nor the joy that it brought me at the time."

So Morris joined the Federation and plunged into its work with all his wonted ardor. He devoted himself to serious study and to whatever work fell to his share. A few months after he had joined it, the Federation became frankly a Marxian Socialist body, the mere reformers getting out.

The name was changed to the Social Democratic Federation, the name embodying the pet phrase of the old Chartist leader, Bronterre O'Brien, who was the first to use the term "Social Democracy."

In less than two years, at the end of 1884, Morris left the Social Democratic Federation and with him went several of the most influential members, Bax, Edward Aveling, Eleanor Marx—the daughter of Karl Marx—and others. The quarrel was largely a personal one and exceedingly bitter. To read the columns of *Justice*, the "S. D. F." organ, and of the *Commonweal*, the organ of the Socialist League which Morris and his associates formed, is to realize how pathetically little it is possible for great men to become under the influence of personal jealousy and suspicion.

Into the causes of the rupture it is not necessary to enter at this time—suffice it to say that to Morris and his friends Mr. Hyndman seemed to be a petty despot, ruling the organization in a manner that was incompatible with the fundamental principles of democracy. After a couple of stormy

sessions of the S. D. F. Council, in which Morris and his friends had a majority of two, the vote being ten to eight, Morris read the resignation of himself and friends and they all left in high dudgeon. English Socialists had split into two factions.

The resignation of so many of the most influential of their number had a sobering effect, and it is probable that had a little tact and common sense been used the split could have been averted. But on both sides there were men of imperious temper, and men whose aim was to set these quarrelling, so the result was inevitable. Morris formed the Socialist League and became its treasurer; started the *Commonweal* and became its editor; lectured incessantly and wrote much of the propaganda literature of the League. Between the two groups of organized Socialists the fight was constant and bitter. Socialist fought Socialist when both should have been fighting Capitalism, the rival organizations making common cause only upon such occasions as the assault by the police upon the sacred right of free speech. The only crumb of com-



HAVE YOU NOT HEARD HOW IT HAS GONE WITH MANY A CAUSE BEFORE NOW: FIRST, FEW MEN HEED IT; NEXT, MOST MEN CONTEMN IT; LASTLY, ALL MEN ACCEPT IT—AND THE CAUSE IS WON!

Editorial "Headpiece" for The Commonweal
Designed by Walter Crane

fort to be gathered from reading both sides of the sorry controversy is that, amid all the abuse, no attack was made upon the character of Morris, the S. D. F. men always speaking of him in terms of respect and regret.

The circumstances of this unfortunate quarrel and split have been somewhat unduly exploited, but its sequel has been, strangely enough, almost wholly ignored. Because I believe that sequel to add greatly to Morris's character, not less than from a desire to do justice to the Socialist movement of England by setting forth accurately an interesting chapter in its history, I desire to make this record of it.



ORRIS, it is just to say, was exceedingly unfortunate in his judgments of men and women—and therefore sadly unfitted for political life. People of little character imposed upon his good nature and credulity with disastrous results. He soon found it to be just as impossible to work with the League he had formed as with the Federation he had left. By strange irony, the complaint

that he had made against Mr. Hyndman was now made by members of the Socialist League against himself. The impatience at political action on the part of the young-men-in-a-hurry was manifesting itself in acute Anarchism, and poor Morris was taxed to the full extent of his powers, trying to stop the suicidal drift. And herein lies a lesson for Socialists everywhere: Once political action is discarded, Anarchism is inevitable.

In the first few weeks of 1886 serious dissensions broke out and thereafter it required all his time and strength to hold things together. Matters went from bad to worse: the personnel of the League degenerated until it was said, not without some justification, that Morris had gathered together a horde of lazy, shiftless and drunken ne'er-do-wells, who did more to discredit Socialism than a hundred men like himself could undo. Morris had created a Frankstein. Gradually, as all the world knows, the League became an Anarchist body, and Morris himself was deposed from the editorship of the *Commonweal* and replaced by one Frank Kitz.



Membership Card of the Socialist League
Designed by Walter Crane
The Smith with the Hammer (a pun) represents Morris

Through all this experience Morris had come to the conclusion that he had been wrong in his quarrel with the S. D. F. and Mr. Hyndman. He wrote to his old-time colleague a letter full of manly confession, acknowledging that he had been entirely wrong and Mr. Hyndman as entirely right, and urging that the strife be forgotten and the old friendship renewed. Nor did he rest until he made a declaration to that effect at a large public meeting at which Mr. Hyndman was present and spoke. The two men resumed the friendship which had been so rudely and unfortunately interrupted; Morris wrote again for *Justice*, contributed to the funds of the S. D. F. and spoke in support of Mr. Hyndman's candidature for Parliament as well as at other important meetings of the S. D. F. All this, I repeat, adds greatly to the glory of Morris as a man, and I have always been unable to understand why none of his biographers has given it the prominence it deserves. It is only fair to add that those who were associated with Morris in the revolt against the Social Democratic Federa-

tion in 1884, almost without exception, came to regard their action as a grave mistake and rejoined the Federation.



IT has been the fashion for the writers of books about Morris to discredit his Socialism, to excuse it or explain it away. Thus, Professor Oscar Lovell Triggs says, "It is apparent that Morris's 'Socialism' is poetic and not scientific Socialism;"* while Miss Elizabeth Luther Cary gives more definite utterance to the commonly accepted notion by saying. "He really never understood what Socialism technically and economically speaking meant"† It would be an easy matter to compile quite a formidable list of such statements, all aiming to convey the impression that Morris was not a Socialist at all—at least not in the sense in which that word is applied to the Marxian Socialists—and that he became attached for a while to a Socialist organization from a

*"William Morris, Craftsman, Writer and Social Reformer," by Oscar Lovell Triggs, p. 33.

†"William Morris, Poet, Craftsman, Socialist," by Elizabeth Luther Cary, p. 158.

mistaken sense of sympathy with the suffering and a feeling of revolt against the ugliness of commercialism. Sometimes the statement is varied and he is called an Anarchist, as, for example, by Mr. John Graham Brooks in his book, *The Social Unrest.**

That these judgments are entirely and pathetically wrong is well known to every English Socialist whose association with the movement dates back to the days when Morris was active in the propaganda; the good old days of stress and hard fighting, when Morris would gather a group of comrades around him, pull tobacco and a motley assortment of pipes from his bag and invite all the group to join in an informal, *al fresco* "Smoker," regaling them with his newest yarns. The facts are that Morris was exceptionally well educated in the principles of scientific Socialism, and that few men have ever been more opposed to, or by, the Anarchists than he was.

When Morris joined the Socialist movement he was, as we have seen, ignorant of

*"The Social Unrest," by John Graham Brooks, p. 173.

economics. But such a man as he was could not long remain in that condition. It was his habit throughout life to make a careful and exhaustive study of anything in which he might be for the time specially interested, a habit which explains much of his work as a craftsman. He began to study the philosophy of Socialism and "put some conscience," as he says, into the study of Marx's *Capital*, using the French version as there was as yet no English translation. Morris was not the man to remain uncertain as to the meaning of what he read and all the difficult points were discussed and debated with Andreas Scheu, an Austrian Socialist of magnificent intellectual gifts, with Hyndman and Bax. That was an education which could not fail to give him a good grip upon his subject.

"Whereas I thoroughly enjoyed the historical part of *Capital*," says Morris, "I suffered agonies of confusion of the brain over reading the pure economics of that great work. Anyhow, I read what I could, and will hope that some information stuck to me from my reading; but more, I must

think, from continuous conversation with such friends as Bax, Hyndman and Scheu, and the brisk course of propaganda meetings which were going on at that time, and in which I took my share."*

Even this modest statement ought to be sufficient answer to such criticisms as those I have cited. Given a man of Morris's education and intellectual gifts allied to a tremendous moral earnestness, putting conscience into the reading of Marx, anxious to learn, and discussing every difficult point with such teachers as Hyndman, Bax and Scheu, and an intelligent understanding of Socialism is inevitable. William Morris was well-grounded in the principles of the Socialism in which he believed, That he could give a satisfactory exposition of the economic and philosophic principles of Socialism is well known to a large number of the Old Guard of the English Socialist movement.

The little book, *A Summary of the Principles of Socialism*, which he wrote

*"How I Became a Socialist" (A series of papers by various uthors), III William Morris, p. 18.

in collaboration with Mr. Hyndman, is still regarded as one of the most satisfactory summaries of Socialism ever made in the English language, and it is a fact that it was the product of a genuine and fair partnership, Morris contributing his full share to the matter as well as to the arrangement of it. Later, he contributed an equal share with Bax to the authorship of the well known *Socialism, its Growth and Outcome*, a recognized classic in Socialist literature. It was the custom of the two writers to thoroughly discuss every point and paragraph together, and I have been assured by Mr. Bax that Morris was jointly, and intelligently, responsible with himself for every sentence in the book. It was Morris who gathered together the chapters as they appeared in the *Commonweal* and revised them for publication.

Leaving out of consideration other writings of his, Morris's work upon the two books named ought to be a sufficient answer to such statements as those of Miss Cary and Professor Triggs. To have read them with ordinary care and intelligence even,

would have been sufficient to give him a fair understanding of what "Socialism, technically and economically speaking meant." I do not claim for William Morris that he ever became qualified to fill a chair as Professor of Marxian Economics and Philosophy in a great Socialist university, but I do assert that he was a careful student of modern Socialism, unusually well equipped to expound its theories, even to the most critical audiences.



O attempt to classify Morris as Anarchist, in spite of his constant claim to be a Socialist, a Social Democrat, is so absurd as to merit scarcely a moment's consideration. In the main, the absurd claim rests upon the delightful freedom of the Utopia he sketched in his prose romance, *News From Nowhere*, and the absence of government machinery from it. Too many superficial critics think of the Socialist State as a huge bureaucracy, in which all individuality is repressed by governmental functions. To such, the free comradeship and ample in-

dividual liberty of Morris's dream-world seem inconsistent with the Socialist ideal, and they at once come to the conclusion that Morris was not a Socialist at all but an Anarchist.

The fact is, of course, that modern Socialism is not an attempt to create a great bureaucracy; that the realisation of its ideals does not necessitate the extension of governmental control over the whole of life; that it has no more in common with such monstrous exaggerations of centralised government as described in Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and mechanical Utopias of its kind than with sun-worship or alchemy. Nothing could be further removed from the spirit of the Socialism that is alive in the heart of the world today, inspiring its millions with glorious visions of liberty and comradeship, than Bellamy's ugly government-ridden world, which was a belated and exaggerated Fourierist phalanstere.

It was Bellamy's work which forced Morris to write his own charming rustic Utopia, and, naturally, it shows the reaction. He hated the harsh, mechanical, rigid, mili-

taristic arrangements of Bellamy's book, which he found "deadly dull." *News From Nowhere* was his expression of revolt against it, against the sordid, materialistic conception of Socialism which it and the Fabian Society's propaganda embodied.* Over and over Morris attacked the notion of State Socialism, a centralisation of industry and the whole business of life in the hands of the government. In the review of Bellamy's book which he published in the *Commonweal* in June 1889, and again in the *Manifesto of the Hammersmith Socialist Society*— successor of the Socialist League— in December of the following year, he attacked State Socialism with great energy. I have seen passages from the review and the manifesto quoted in support of the claim that Morris was an Anarchist, but no such inference from them is justifiable.

In the same manifesto, for example, he repudiates Anarchism with even greater vigor than that with which he disclaims State Socialism. "It is not the dissolution of society for which we strive, but its re-integration.

*This, only in so far as the Fabians preached State Socialism.

The idea put forward by some who attack present society, of the complete independence of every individual, that is, of freedom without society, is not merely impossible of realisation, but when looked into, turns out to be inconceivable." This passage of itself might fairly be regarded as a complete refutation of the claim that Morris was an Anarchist, but it is by no means the sole evidence.

Anyone who knows the history of the Socialist League must know that Morris was constantly combatting anarchistic tendencies within it. In an autobiographical note, telling how he became a Socialist, he says: "Such finish to what of education in practical Socialism I am capable of I received afterwards from some of my Anarchist friends, from whom I learned, quite against their intention, that Anarchism was impossible, much as I learned from Mill against *his* intention that Socialism was necessary."

Of a manifesto issued by some Anarchists, which the London *Daily News* had ascribed to the Social Democratic Federation, Morris wrote: "The manifesto . . . . is



Kelmscott Church

not ours; nor is it Social Democratic, *which is what we are*, but Anarchist. We consider them (i. e. the Anarchists) dangerous; for you see they have no programme but destruction, whereas we are constructive. People in general are quite ignorant of the whole matter."*

Here is the secret: It was *impossible* for Morris to be an Anarchist with his constructive mind. The purely destructive philosophy of Anarchism repelled him. The craftsman, the maker of things, held a craftsman's attitude toward life; he was a builder of a new social order, not merely the destroyer of an old one. The principles of that new social order had shaped themselves very definitely in his mind. Nothing could be more completely wrong than the classification of Morris as an Anarchist, and it is to be hoped that it will not again need to be denied.



Y some of his most ardent admirers Morris's association with the Socialist movement has been deeply deplored because of its influence upon his literary work. They

*"Life of William Morris," by J. W. Mackail, vol. ii, pp. 111-112

regret that he should have tired of being the idle "singer of an empty day" and ceased to be satisfied with the life he described as his in the prologue to *The Earthly Paradise:—*

Dreamer of Dreams, born out of my due time,
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?
Let it suffice me that my murmuring rhymes,
Beat with light wings against the ivory gate
Telling a tale not too importunate
To those who in the sleepy region stay,
Lulled by the singer of an empty day.

Even such a sympathetic critic as the late Ernest Howard Crosby declared that Morris had "lost the magic of his touch when he began to write verse for the Socialists."* That is a very common criticism. It is believed by many that the use of art for propaganda purposes of any kind, but especially for political propaganda, is almost universally disastrous for art. Whether we choose to accept this view or not, it can-

*In The New Penny Chap Book, vol. i, No. 3, April, 1900.

not be gainsaid that a formidable array of quotations covering the whole range of literature, and many illustrations from pictorial art, might be adduced in its support. Morris himself, it will be remembered, wrote a farce for the Socialist League, *Nupkins Awakened*, a puerile production which might have been written by any Fleet Street hack in the course of his daily grind.

Nevertheless, I venture to make the claim that the whole of Morris's marvellous output contains nothing finer than the best of his Socialist writings in prose and verse. There are prosy passages more than a few in *The Pilgrims of Hope*, just as there are prosy interludes in *The Earthly Paradise*, but there are also passages of wonderful charm and beauty, passages equal to anything he ever wrote. This, from the *Message of the March Wind*, seems to me to be as perfect in its way as anything Morris ever penned:

Fair now is the springtide, now earth lies beholding
With the eyes of a lover the face of the sun;

Long lasteth the daylight, and hope is enfolding
The green-growing acres with increase begun.

Now sweet, sweet it is through the land to be straying
'Mid the birds and the blossoms and the beasts of the field;
Love mingles with love and no evil is weighing
On thy heart or mine, where all sorrow is healed.

From township to township, o'er down and by tillage
Fair, far have we wandered as long as the day,
But now cometh eve at the end of the village,
Where o'er the grey wall the church riseth grey.

There is wind in the twilight; in the white road before us,
The straw from the ox-yard is blowing about;
The moon's rim is rising, a star glitters o'er us,
And the vane on the spire-top is swinging in doubt.

Down there dips the highway, toward the
bridge crossing over
The brook that runs on to the Thames
and the sea.
Draw closer, my sweet, we are lover and
lover;
This eve thou art given to gladness and me.

If it be objected that the selection from which these stanzas are taken is not a fair test of the matter we are discussing; that, although appearing in a Socialist journal and written when Socialism was the dominant influence in the poet's life, it is still not a Socialist poem, but a picture of rare beauty and a love-song more justly to be classed with that little duet of almost incomparable speetness and purity in *Ogier the Dane* with its refrain

Kiss me, love, for who knoweth
What thing cometh after death?

I cheerfully admit the point and turn elsewhere for illustration. Where, in any of Morris's poems, is there sweeter, purer, more inspiring verse than in the song, *All for the Cause*, so often heard at Socialist meetings?—

Ah, it may be! oft meseemeth, in the days
that yet shall be,
When no slave of gold abideth 'twixt the
breadth of sea to sea,

Oft, when men and maids are merry, ere
the sunlight leaves the earth,
And they bless the day beloved, all too
short for all their mirth,

Some shall pause awhile and ponder on
the bitter days of old;
Ere the toil of strife and battle overthrew
the curse of gold;

Then 'twixt lips of loved and lover solemn
thoughts of us shall rise;
We who once were fools and dreamers,
then shall be the brave and wise;

There amidst the world new-builded shall
our earthly deeds abide,
Though our names be all forgotten, and
the tale of how we died.

Life or death then, who shall heed it, what
we gain or what we lose?
Fair flies life amid the struggle, and the
Cause for each shall choose.

Equally beautiful is the famous *March of the Workers* with its magnificent line of supreme faith—

For the hope of every creature is the banner that we bear.

And nowhere in all the literature of Liberty and Progress is there a nobler, greater poem than *The Coming Day*, with its splendid faith in—

A wonderful day a-coming when all shall be better than well.

Certainly there is nothing in Morris's earlier work superior to these magnificent Socialist poems. And never, I dare believe and say, was Morris a greater, truer poet than when he wrote the stately verses of *A Death Song*, commemorating the death of Alfred Linnell, who was killed by the police in a Trafalgar Square riot. Witness these fine lines:—

We asked them for a life of toilsome earning,
They bade us bide their leisure for our bread,

We craved to speak to tell our woeful
learning,
We come back speechless, bringing back
our dead.

They will not learn; they have no ears to
harken.
They turn their faces from the eyes of fate;
Their gay-lit halls shut out the skies that
darken.
But, lo! this dead man knocking at the gate.

Here lies the sign that we shall break our
prison;
Amidst the storm he won a prisoner's rest;
But in the cloudy dawn the sun arisen
Brings us our day of work to win the best.
Not one, not one, nor thousands must they
slay,
But one and all if they would dusk the
day.

As a prose writer, Morris reached the highest level in his Socialist writings. By far the noblest of his prose work is the *Dream of John Ball*, one of the finest examples of English prose extant. Beautiful, too, are *The King's Lesson* and the little

fragment, *Under a Country Elm*, printed in the *Commonweal*, in which Morris asks why men cannot be "as wise as the starlings in their equality, and so perhaps as happy." And in the lectures devoted wholly or in part to Socialism there is an intensity of force which distinguishes them from, and elevates them over, all his other lectures.

Utterly without regard to their subject-matter, judging them merely as examples of English prose, I would gladly give all his other works in exchange for those in which his Socialist faith appears. No! Socialism did not mar Morris's literary genius —though its propaganda did betray him into doing a lot of slip-shod journalism. On the contrary, Socialism brought into his work the glory of a more passionate inspiration and the force of a definite faith. After all, it is idle to attempt to separate the art of Morris from the Socialism: they were interdependent, parts of one glorious inspiring whole.



The Wagon on which the Body was Borne to the Grave



ILLIAM Morris did not, as is sometimes alleged, lose faith in Socialism. He died, as for many years he lived, an ardent Socialist. And it is not without melancholy interest that his last contribution to the literature of the movement was an article in the May Day issue of *Justice*, organ of the Social Democratic Federation, bearing witness to the complete and happy healing of old-time sores.

On the third day of October, 1896, he fell asleep, aged sixty-three years. They buried him in the little churchyard at Kelmscott, of which there is such a charming description in *News From Nowhere*. Amid a drenching, tempestuous rain the funeral ceremonies took place, ceremonies befitting the man. The plain coffin, of unpolished oak with wrought iron handles, was borne from Lechdale station to the church yard gate upon one of the farm wagons, a bright yellow affair with brilliant red wheels, drawn by a roan mare and led by one of the farm laborers. The wagon was decked with vines and carpeted with moss and

willow boughs. Over the coffin was placed a piece of rich velvet which Morris had long admired for its beauty. Through the dripping lanes the cortege wended its way, as picturesque as the life of the dead poet-artist. And the little fourteenth-century church was decorated with fruits and flowers for the harvest festival, recalling Morris's description of the same church, in *News From Nowhere*, decked with flowers for a village festival. With the family and friends were mingled some of Morris's workmen and Kelmscott villagers, in their working dress, some Socialist comrades and others, Edward Burne Jones, closest friend of all, a notably pathetic figure among the mourners.

Such another funeral as that England has never seen, just as such another man has never been born to her race. He might have been buried in Westminster Abbey amid great pomp and splendor, but one likes best to think of the church he loved, dressed for festal joy as he loved to see it; of his friends and comrades and the simple ceremony.

It is fitting that I close this essay by quoting from what was probably his last

message upon the subject of Socialism. An American correspondent had written him asking him if he had changed his mind upon the subject. He replied, in January, 1896:

"I have not changed my mind on Socialism. My view on the point of relation between Art and Socialism is as follows: Society (so called) at present is organized entirely for the benefit of a privileged class; the working-class being only considered in the arrangment as so much machinery. This involves perpetual and enormous *waste*, and the organization for the production of genuine utilities is only a secondary consideration. This waste lands the whole civilized world in a position of *artificial* poverty, which again debars men of all classes from satisfying their rational desires. Rich men are in a slavery to philistinism, poor men to penury. We can none of us have what we want, except (partially only) by making prodigious sacrifices, which very few men can ever do. Before, therefore, we can so much as hope for any Art, we must be free from this artificial poverty.

When we are thus free, in my opinion, the natural instincts of mankind toward beauty and incident will take their due place; we shall *want* Art, and since we shall be really wealthy, we shall be able to have what we want."

So Morris died a Socialist; full of faith. His soul's yearning was for the day when men shall be "as wise as the starlings in their equality, and so perhaps as happy."



The Grave at Kelmscott Churchyard

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